

PRICELESS PARABLES



by Max Lucado

Introduction

Picture this: your child comes home from school, nursing hurt feelings. You comfort her and begin telling her a story from your own childhood to help her deal with her hurt.

Or a friend, confused and uncertain, comes to you for counsel. Your best advice begins like this: “You know, something like this happened to me once....”

Stories. Parables. We use them to teach, to share, to comfort.

We learned this technique from the greatest teacher. “Jesus taught them many things, using stories” (Mark 4:2).

Parables help us understand simple and complex truths. Here are some of my favorites.

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THE PARABLE OF THE MOP BUCKET

THE HALLWAY is silent except for the wheels of the mop bucket and the shuffle of the old man's feet. Both sound tired.

Both know these floors. How many nights has Hank cleaned them? Always careful to get in the corners. Always careful to set up his yellow caution sign warning of wet floors. Always chuckling as he does. "Be careful everyone," he laughs to himself, knowing no one is near.

Not at three AM.

Hank's health isn't what it used to be. Gout keeps him awake. Arthritis makes him limp. His glasses are so thick his eyeballs look twice their size. Shoulders stoop. But he does his work. Slopping soapy water on linoleum. Scrubbing the heel marks left by the well-heeled lawyers. He'll be finished an hour before quitting time. Always finishes early. Has for twenty years.

When finished he'll put away his bucket and take a seat outside the office of the senior partner and wait. Never leaves early. Could. No one would know. But he doesn't.

He broke the rules once. Never again.

Sometimes, if the door is open, he'll enter the office. Not for long. Just to look. The suite is larger than his apartment. He'll run his finger over the desk. He'll stroke the soft leather couch. He'll stand at the window and watch the gray sky turn gold. And he'll remember.

He once had such an office.

Back when Hank was Henry. Back when the custodian was an executive. Long ago. Before the night shift. Before the mop bucket. Before the maintenance uniform. Before the scandal.

Hank doesn't think about it much now. No reason to. Got in trouble, got fired, and got out. That's it. Not many people know about it. Better that way. No need to tell them.

It's his secret.

Hank's story, by the way, is true. I changed the name and a detail or two. I gave him a different job and put him in a different century. But the story is factual. You've heard it. You know it. When I give you his real name, you'll remember.

But more than a true story, it's a common story. It's a story of a derailed dream. It's a story of high hopes colliding with harsh realities.

Happens to all dreamers. And since all have dreamed, it happens to us all.

In Hank's case, it was a mistake he could never forget. A grave mistake. Hank killed someone. He came upon a thug beating up an innocent man, and Hank lost control. He killed the mugger. When word got out, Hank got out.

Hank would rather hide than go to jail. So he ran. The executive became a fugitive.

True story. Common story. Most stories aren't as extreme as Hank's. Few spend their lives running from the law. Many, however, live with regrets.

"I could have gone to college on a golf scholarship," a fellow told me just last week on the fourth tee box. "Had an offer right out of school. But I joined a rock-and-roll band. Ended up never going. Now I'm stuck fixing garage doors."

"Now I'm stuck." Epitaph of a derailed dream.

Pick up a high school yearbook and read the "What I want to do" sentence under each picture. You'll get dizzy breathing the thin air of mountaintop visions:

"Ivy league school."

"Write books and live in Switzerland."

"Physician in a Third World country."

"Teach inner-city kids."

Yet, take the yearbook to a twentieth-year reunion and read the next chapter. Some dreams have come true, but many haven't. Not that all should, mind you. I hope the little guy who dreamed of being a sumo wrestler came to his senses. And I hope he didn't lose his passion in the process. Changing direction in life is not tragic. Losing passion in life is.

Something happens to us along the way. Convictions to change the world downgrade to commitments to pay the bills. Rather than make a difference, we make a salary. Rather than look forward, we look back. Rather than look outward, we look inward.

And we don't like what we see.

Hank didn't. Hank saw a man who'd settled for the mediocre. Trained in the finest institutions of the world, yet working the night shift in a minimum-wage job so he wouldn't be seen in the day.

But all that changed when he heard the voice from the mop bucket. (Did I mention that his story is true?)

At first he thought the voice was a joke. Some of the fellows on the third floor play these kinds of tricks.

"Henry, Henry," the voice called.

Hank turned. No one called him Henry anymore.

"Henry, Henry."

He turned toward the pail. It was glowing. Bright red. Hot red. He could feel the heat ten feet away. He stepped closer and looked in. The water wasn't boiling.

"This is strange," Hank mumbled to himself as he took another step to get a closer look. But the voice stopped him.

"Don't come any closer. Take off your shoes. You are on holy tile."

Suddenly Hank knew who was speaking. "God?"

I'm not making this up. I know you think I am. Sounds crazy. Almost irreverent. God speaking from a hot mop bucket to a janitor named Hank? Would it be believable if I said God was speaking from a burning bush to a shepherd named Moses?

Maybe that one's easier to handle—because you've heard it before. But just because it's Moses and a bush rather than Hank and a bucket, it's no less spectacular.

It sure shocked the sandals off Moses. We wonder what amazed the old fellow more: that God spoke in a bush or that God spoke at all.

Moses, like Hank, had made a mistake.

You remember his story. Adopted nobility. An Israelite reared in an Egyptian palace. His countrymen were slaves, but Moses was privileged. Ate at the royal table. Educated in the finest schools.

But his most influential teacher had no degree. She was his mother. A Jewess who was hired to be his nanny. "Moses," you can almost hear her whisper to her young son, "God has put you here on purpose. Someday you will set your people free. Never forget, Moses. Never forget."

Moses didn't. The flame of justice grew hotter until it blazed. Moses saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew slave. Just like Hank killed the mugger, Moses killed the Egyptian.

The next day Moses saw the Hebrew. You'd think the slave would say thanks. He didn't. Rather than express gratitude, he expressed anger. "Will you kill me too?" he asked (see Exod.

2:14).

Moses knew he was in trouble. He fled Egypt and hid in the wilderness. Call it a career shift. He went from dining with the heads of state to counting heads of sheep.

Hardly an upward move.

And so it happened that a bright, promising Hebrew began herding sheep in the hills. From the Ivy League to the cotton patch. From the Oval Office to a taxicab. From swinging a golf club to digging a ditch.

Moses thought the move was permanent. There is no indication he ever intended to go back to Egypt. In fact, there is every indication he wanted to stay with his sheep. Standing barefoot before the bush, he confessed, "I am not a great man! How can I go to the king and lead the Israelites out of Egypt?" (Exod. 3:11).

I'm glad Moses asked that question. It's a good one. Why Moses? Or, more specifically, why eighty-year-old Moses?

The forty-year-old version was more appealing. The Moses we saw in Egypt was brash and confident. But the Moses we find four decades later is reluctant and weather-beaten.

Had you or I looked at Moses back in Egypt, we would have said, "This man is ready for battle." Educated in the finest system in the world. Trained by the ablest soldiers. Instant access to the inner circle of the Pharaoh. Moses spoke their language and knew their habits. He was the perfect man for the job.

Moses at forty we like. But Moses at eighty? No way. Too old. Too tired. Smells like a shepherd. Speaks like a foreigner. What impact would he have on Pharaoh? He's the wrong man for the job.

And Moses would have agreed. "Tried that once before," he would say. "Those people don't want to be helped. Just leave me here to tend my sheep. They're easier to lead."

Moses wouldn't have gone. You wouldn't have sent him. I wouldn't have sent him.

But God did. How do you figure? Benched at forty and suited up at eighty. Why? What does he know now that he didn't know then? What did he learn in the desert that he didn't learn in Egypt?

The ways of the desert, for one. Forty-year-old Moses was a city boy. Octogenarian Moses knows the name of every snake and the location of every watering hole. If he's going to lead thousands of Hebrews into the wilderness, he better know the basics of desert life 101.

Family dynamics, for another. If he's going to be traveling with families for forty years, it might help to understand how they work. He marries a woman of faith, the daughter of a Midianite priest, and establishes his own family.

But more than the ways of the desert and the people, Moses needed to learn something about himself.

Apparently he has learned it. God says Moses is ready.

And to convince him, God speaks through a bush. (Had to do something dramatic to get Moses' attention.)

"School's out," God tells him. "Now it's time to get to work." Poor Moses. He didn't even know he was enrolled.

But he was. And, guess what? So are you. The voice from the bush is the voice that whispers to you. It reminds you that God is not finished with you yet. Oh, you may think he is. You may think you've peaked. You may think he's got someone else to do the job.

If so, think again.

"God began doing a good work in you, and I am sure he will continue it until it is finished when Jesus Christ comes again."

Did you see what God is doing? *A good work in you.*

Did you see when he will be finished? *When Jesus comes again.*

May I spell out the message? *God ain't finished with you yet.*

Your Father wants you to know that. And to convince you, he may surprise you. He may speak through a bush, a mop bucket, or stranger still, he may speak through this book.

Chapter Two

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THE PARABLE OF THE

SANDWICH SIGN

I am the voice of the one calling out in the desert: "Make the road straight for the Lord."

--John 1:23

THE FACES of the three men were solemn as the mayor informed them of the catastrophe. "The rains have washed away the bridge. During the night many cars drove over the edge and into the river."

"What can we do?" asked one.

"You must stand on the side of the road and warn the drivers not to make the left turn. Tell them to take the one-lane road that follows the side of the river."

"But they drive so fast! How can we warn them?"

"By wearing these sandwich signs," the mayor explained, producing three wooden double-signs, hinged together to hang from one's shoulders. "Stand at the crossroads so drivers can see these signs until I can get someone out there to fix the bridge."

And so the men hurried out to the dangerous curve and put the signs over their shoulders.

"The drivers should see me first," spoke one. The others agreed. His sign warned, "Bridge Out!" He walked several hundred yards before the turn and took his post.

"Perhaps I should be second, so the drivers will slow down," spoke the one whose sign declared, "Reduce Speed."

"Good idea," agreed the third. "I'll stand here at the curve so people will get off the wide road and onto the narrow." His sign read simply "Take Right Road" and had a finger pointing toward the safe route.

And so the three men stood with their three signs ready to warn the travelers of the washed-out bridge. As the cars approached, the first man would stand up straight so the drivers could read, "Bridge Out."

Then the next would gesture to his sign, telling the cars to "Reduce Speed."

And as the motorists complied, they would then see the third sign, "Right Road Only." And though the road was narrow, the cars complied and were safe. Hundreds of lives were saved by the three sign holders. Because they did their job, many people were kept from peril.

But after a few hours they grew lax in their task.

The first man got sleepy. "I'll sit where people can read my sign as I sleep," he decided. So he took his sign off his shoulders and propped it up against a boulder. He leaned against it and fell asleep. As he slept his arm slid over the sign, blocking one of the two words. So rather than read "Bridge Out," his sign simply stated "Bridge."

The second didn't grow tired, but he did grow conceited. The longer he stood warning the people the more important he felt. A few even pulled off to the side of the road to thank him for the job well done.

"We might have died had you not told us to slow down," they applauded.

"You're so right," he thought to himself. "How many people would be lost were it not for me?"

Presently he came to think that he was just as important as his sign. So he took it off, set it up on the ground, and stood beside it. As he did, he was unaware that he, too, was blocking one word of his warning. He was standing in front of the word "Speed." All the drivers could read was the word "Reduce." Most thought he was advertising a diet plan.

The third man was not tired like the first, nor self-consumed like the second. But he was concerned about the message of his sign. "Right Road Only," it read.

It troubled him that his message was so narrow, so dogmatic. "People should be given a choice in the matter. Who am I to tell them which is the right road and which is the wrong road?"

So he decided to alter the wording of the sign. He marked out the word "Only" and changed it to "Preferred."

"Hmm," he thought, "that's still too strident. One is best not to moralize. So he marked out the word "Preferred" and wrote "Suggested."

That still didn't seem right, "Might offend people if they think I'm suggesting I know something they don't."

So he thought and thought and finally marked through the word "Suggested" and replaced it with a more neutral phrase.

"Ahh, just right," he said to himself as he backed off and read the words:

"Right Road—One of Two Equally Valid Alternatives."

And so as the first man slept and the second stood and the third altered the message, one car after another plunged into the river.

THE PARABLE OF THE WATERMASTER

I am the voice of the one calling out in the desert. "Make the road straight for the Lord."

-- John 1:23

YEARS AGO there was a village in a desert. Water was scarce, and the people treasured what little they had. It seldom rained, but when it did, people scurried about to capture it in buckets and pots. Every drop was a treasure. Every cup was precious.

For that reason the discovery in the cavern was thrilling news.

One day a farmer was digging holes for fence posts. A few feet below the surface of the ground he found a cavern—not large, but full of water.

He immediately lowered a bucket, pulled it out, and tasted, to his delight, cold, sweet water. He was so excited he filled all his buckets, loaded them in the back of his wagon, and hurried into the village.

"I have water! I have water!" he shouted. The villagers came running out of their houses.

As the people gathered, the farmer explained how he had come upon the treasure. He joyfully announced that there was enough for everyone. "Drink all you want," he offered. And then, to the people's amazement, he picked up a bucket and doused a little boy.

"There is plenty!" he proclaimed. "Enjoy it." And with that the people began to laugh and splash each other. For the first time as long as anyone could remember, there was enough water for everyone.

After the celebration, the farmer announced his plan. "I'll bring some water in every morning so each of you can have what you need."

And that's exactly what he did. The farmer became the watermaster. Every morning he loaded the buckets into his wagon, rode into town and gave some water to the people. It was a new day. The water was free. The farmer was willing, and the villagers were grateful.

Until one night when the farmer had a dream.

In the dream he saw the people taking the water and not being thankful. They would walk up to the wagon, snatch a bucket, and march away without a word of appreciation.

When he awoke, he was troubled. As he rode into town, he resolved to give the water only to the grateful.

Before he allowed the people to take their buckets, he announced, "From now on, I will not give water to those who aren't thankful." The people were surprised. Each person thanked him when he or she received the water.

All was well until the farmer had another dream. In this dream, some of the people who were drinking the water were unkind to their neighbors and mean to their animals. The next morning he was bothered again. He decided he would only give water to worthy individuals.

"If you are mean to your animals or unkind to your neighbors, you will get no water," he decreed.

The people looked at each other and were silent. They knew the bad people among them. When the watermaster saw the looks of distrust, he had an idea.

"Each of you come and tell me who is unworthy so I will know who is mean and unkind."

So one by one, they came with their names, and he made a list. The list grew and grew. Finally, after every villager had spoken, the farmer read the names. He was shocked. Every person in the town was on the list except one.

The farmer.

So he stood on the wagon and announced that since few were grateful and none were worthy, he would bring no more water to the village. And he turned his wagon of water around and went home.

"Love your enemies! Do good to them! Lend to them!. . . and you will be truly acting as sons of God: for he is kind to the unthankful and to those who are very wicked. "(Luke 6:35 TLB.)

"Be quick to share the water of grace with your enemies—as a gift for them, just as it was a gift to you."

THE PARABLE OF THE STONES

*A wife of noble character who can find?
She is worth far more than rubies.
-- Proverbs 3 1:10 (NW)*

I MUST WARN you, reader; before you begin. These words are ancient jewels mined from the quarry of my life. Read them only if you dare treasure them. For it would be better to never know, than to know and not obey.

The hand which writes them is now old, wrinkled from the sun and labor. But the mind which guides them is wise-

*wise from years
wise from failures
wise from heartache.
I am Asmara, merchant of fine stones.*

I am a seller of stones. I travel from city to city. I buy jewels from the diggers in one land and sell them to the buyers in another I have weathered nights on stormy waters. I have walked days through desert heat. I have dined with kings. I have drunk with paupers. My hands have held the finest rubies and stroked the deepest furs. But I would trade it all for the one jewel I never knew.

It was not for lack of opportunity that I never held it. There was a chance in Madrid when I was young. No, it was not for lack of opportunity. It was for lack of wisdom. The jewel was in my hand, but I exchanged it for an imitation. And now I fear my days will end without my ever knowing the beauty of the precious stone.

I have never known true love.

I have known embraces. I have seen beauty. But I have never known love.

If only I'd learned to recognize love as I have learned to recognize stones.

My father taught me about stones. He was a jewel cutter. He would seat me at a table before a dozen emeralds. "One is true," he would tell me. "The others are false. Find the true jewel."

I would ponder—studying one after the other. Finally I would choose. I was always wrong.

"The secret, "he would say," is not on the surface of the stone; it is inside the stone. A true jewel has a glow. Deep within the gem there is a flame. The surface can always be polished to shine, but with time the sparkle fades. However, the stone that shines from within will never fade."

With the years, my eyes learned to spot true stones. I am never fooled. The stones I purchase are authentic. The gems I sell are true. I have learned to see the light within.

If only I'd learned the same about love.

But I've been foolish, dear reader, and I've been fooled.

I've spent my life in places I shouldn't have been, looking for someone with sparkling eyes, beautiful hair, a dazzling smile, and fancy clothes. I've searched for a woman with outer beauty, but no true value. And now I am left with emptiness.

Once I almost found her. Many years ago in Madrid, I met the daughter of a farmer. Her ways were simple. Her love was pure. Her eyes were honest. But her looks were plain. She would have loved me. She would have held me through every season. Within her was a glow of devotion the like of which I've never seen since.

But I continued looking for someone whose beauty would outshine the rest.

How many times since have I longed for that farm girl's kind heart, her sweet smile, her faithfulness? If only I'd known that true beauty is found inside, not outside. If only I'd known, how many tears would I have saved?

I'd trade in a moment a thousand rare gems for the true heart of one who would have loved me.

Dear reader, heed my warning. Look closely at the stones before you open your purse. True love glows from within and grows stronger with the passage of time.

Heed my caution. Look for the purest gem. Look deep within the heart to find the greatest beauty of all. And when you find that gem, hold onto her and never let her go.

For in her you have been granted a treasure worth far more than rubies.

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Seek beauty and miss love.

But seek love and find both.

THE PARABLE OF THE RIVER

*Those who are right with God will live by trusting him
—Rom. 1:17*

ONCE THERE were four sons who lived in a mountain castle with their father. The eldest was obedient but the younger three were forgetful. The father had warned them of the river, but they had not listened. He had told them to stay out of its furious waters, but they didn't obey. He had begged them to stay clear of the bank lest they be swept downstream, but the lure was too strong.

Each day they ventured closer and closer to the bank until one dared to reach in and feel the waters. "Hold my hand, so I won't fall," and the brothers did, but when he touched the water the current yanked him and the other two into the tide and rolled them down the river.

Over rocks they bounced, through the channels they roared, on the swells they rode. Their cries for help were lost in the roar of the river. They fought to gain their balance but were powerless before the current. After hours of struggle they gave up hope of escape and surrendered to wherever the river would lead. Finally the waters dumped them on the bank in a strange land, in a distant country, in a barren place.

Savage people dwelt in the land. It was not safe like their home.

Cold winds chilled the land. It was not warm like their home.

Rugged mountains marked the land. It was not inviting like their home. Though they didn't know where they were, of one fact they were sure: they were not intended for this place.

For a long time the sons lay on the bank, stunned at their fall, not knowing where to turn. After some time they gathered their strength and re-entered the waters, hoping to walk upstream. The current was too strong. They ventured to walk the river's edge; the terrain was too steep. They pondered climbing the mountains, but the peaks were too high. Besides, they didn't know the way.

Finally they built a fire and sat down. "We made a mistake," they admitted, "and we are a long way from home," they said.

With the passage of time, the sons learned to survive in the strange land. They found nuts for food and killed animals for skins. They determined not to forget their homeland nor abandon hopes of returning. Each day they set about the tasks of finding food and building shelter. Each evening they built a fire and told stories of their father and older brother and longed to see them

again.

Then, one night, one brother failed to come to the fire. His brothers found him the next morning in the hills with the savages. He was building a hut of grass and mud. "I've grown tired of our talks," he told them. "What good does it do to remember? Besides, this land isn't so bad. I will build a great house and settle here."

"But it isn't home," they objected.

"No, but it is if you don't think of the real one."

"But what of Father?"

"What of him? He isn't here. He isn't near. Am I to spend forever awaiting his arrival? I'm making new friends, I'm learning new ways. If he comes, he comes, but I'm not holding my breath."

And so the two brothers left the hut-building brother and walked away. They continued to meet around the fire to speak of home and dream of the return.

But one evening, one brother failed to appear at the campfire. The next morning his brother found the missing brother near the river stacking rocks in the water.

"It's no use," he explained as he worked. "Father won't come for me. I must go to him. I offended him. I insulted him. I failed him. I was the one who first touched the water. I was the one who caused you and our brother to fall. There is only one option. I will build a path through the river and walk into our father's presence. Rock upon rock I will stack until I can journey upstream the distance of our fall. When he sees how hard I have worked and how diligent I have been, he will have no choice but to open the door and let me into his house."

The last brother did not know what to say.

Alone, he returned to the fire.

One night, as the remaining brother sat near the fire, he heard a familiar voice speak out of the shadows.

"Father has sent me to bring you home."

He lifted his face to see the eyes of his older brother. For a long time the two embraced.

"And your brothers?" the eldest finally asked.

"One has made a home here. The other is building a path to our father."

And so the firstborn set out to find his siblings. He found one in a thatched hut on a hillside.

"Go away, stranger!" screamed the brother through the window. "You are not welcome here!"

"I have come to take you home."

"You have not. You have come to take my mansion.

"This is no mansion," Firstborn countered. "This is a hut."

"It is a mansion! The finest in the lowlands. I built it with my own hands. Now, go away, you cannot have my mansion."

"Don't you remember the house of your father?"

"I have no father."

"You were born in a castle in a distant land where the air is warm and the fruit plentiful. You disobeyed your father and ended up in this strange land. I have come to take you home."

The brother peered through the window at Firstborn as if seeing a face he'd seen in a dream. But the pause was brief, for suddenly the savages in the house filled the window as well. "Go away, interloper!" they demanded. "This is not your home."

"You are right," responded the firstborn son. "But neither is it his."

The eyes of the two brothers met again and once more the brother felt a tug in his heart, but the savages had won his trust. "He just wants your mansion," they cried. "Send him away!"

And so he did.

Firstborn sought the other brother. He found him knee-deep in the river, stacking rocks. He struggled to keep his balance against the current.

"Father has sent me to take you home."

The brother never looked up. "I can't talk now, my friend. I must work."

"Father knows you have fallen. But he will forgive you...."

"He may," the brother interrupted, "but I have to get to the castle first. I must build a road up the river. Then I will ask for his mercy."

"He has already given his mercy. I will carry you up the river. The river is too long. The water is too swift for your legs. The task is too great for your hands. He sent me. I am stronger."

For the first time the brother looked up. "How dare you speak with such irreverence! My father will not simply forgive. I have sinned. I have sinned greatly! He told me to avoid the river and I disobeyed. Not only that, I pulled my brothers in the water with me. I am a great sinner. I need much work."

"No, my brother, you don't need much work. You need much grace. The distance between you and our father's house is too great. You haven't enough strength nor the stones to build the road. That is why Father sent me. I will carry you home."

"Are you saying I can't do it? Are you saying I'm not strong enough? Look at my work. Look at my rocks. Already I've journeyed five steps!"

"But you have five million to go!"

The younger brother looked at Firstborn with anger. "I know who you are. You are the voice of evil. You are trying to seduce me from my holy work. Get behind me, you serpent!" The rock he was about to place in the river, he lunged at Firstborn.

"Heretic!" screamed the path-builder. "Leave this land. You can't stop me! I will build this road and stand before my father and he will have to forgive me. I will win his favor. I will earn his mercy."

Firstborn shook his head. "Favor won is no favor. Mercy earned is no mercy. You treat your father like a whore trying to buy his love."

This time the rock hit its mark. "Leave me, you stranger," screamed the brother.

Firstborn brushed the blood from his forehead. "I appeal to you, let me carry you up river."

The response was another rock. So First born turned and left.

The youngest brother was waiting when the firstborn returned.

"The other two didn't come?"

"No, one chose pleasure and the other chose guilt. Neither chose the father."

"So they will remain?"

The elder brother nodded slowly. "At least for now."

"And we will return to our father?" asked the brother.

"Yes."

"Will he forgive me?"

"Would he have sent me if he wouldn't?"

And so the younger brother climbed on the back of Firstborn and began the journey home.

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